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Higher English

HSN41101
Romeo and Juliet Sample Essays

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Essay 1

Choose a **play** in which a major character has significant flaws in his or her personality.

Explain how the dramatist makes you aware of these flaws and discuss how it adds to the appreciation of the play as a whole.

In your answer you must refer closely to the text and at least **two** of: characterisation, theme, key scene(s), or any other appropriate feature.

Answer

A play in which a major character has significant flaws in her personality is “Romeo and Juliet” by William Shakespeare. I intend to show how Shakespeare makes me aware of these flaws in Juliet and how these flaws contributed to my appreciation of the play as a whole.

Juliet’s love for Romeo could be seen as a flaw in her character – it is this which ultimately brings about her untimely death. The “star-crossed lovers” meet at the Capulet Masquerade, where Romeo tells Juliet that his lips are like “two blushing pilgrims”. This makes it clear that Romeo worships Juliet as a Goddess. Soon Juliet reveals that “her love has grown to such excess” and that she “cannot sum up half of all [her] wealth”. This comparison likens her love to the wealth of her family and shows her strong feelings for Romeo. The use of imagery and metaphor here sum up the strength of Juliet’s love for Romeo and show that the action of later on in the play were unavoidable as she would have been unable to live without Romeo.

After Romeo kills Tybalt in Scene One of Act Three, Juliet uses the oxymoron “fiend angelical”. This shows that although she feels angry at Romeo’s actions, she cannot hide her love for him. This forgiveness could be seen to be a flaw in her personality which also contributes to the rest of the play – and ultimately her death. If she had not allowed her relationship with Romeo to continue after this point, she would not have taken her own life. The fact that she forgave Romeo, and allowed their relationship to continue, shows the strength of her feelings for him.

Juliet’s deceit could also be seen as a flaw in her personality. The fact that she misleads her family – by keeping her marriage to Romeo secret – and therefore denies them the chance of supporting her, unquestionably spells disaster. If she had told her family about her relationship, the “ancient grudge” between the Houses of Montague and Capulet may have been resolved and she would not have met her untimely death. Juliet also deceived her family when she agreed to marry the suitor Paris even although she was already married to Romeo. This shows the full extent of her love for Romeo: it is more important than the wishes of her parents. This deceit, I think, is paramount to the play as Juliet’s family may have supported her and she would not have had to continue her relationship with Romeo in secret.

Juliet also deceives her only real friend, the Nurse, after she suggests that Juliet marries Paris. Juliet dismisses the Nurse as a “most wicked fiend”. At this point in the play, Juliet finds herself with no one but the Friar to turn to – who may be partially blamed for the outcome of the play.

This perhaps introduces another flaw in Juliet's character: her trust in the Friar and her compliance with his plan. The scene where Juliet has the potion in her hand and is trying to decide whether or not to take it, for me, shows this trusting flaw in her personality. She believes that because the Friar is a "holy man", he would not try to poison her. The Friar may indeed be a "holy man" but he later deserts Juliet in her tomb showing that at a time when he must choose between his own wellbeing and others', the former takes precedence.

Since we are told by the Prologue of the tragic ending, we constantly look for signs of this as we read or watch the play. I feel that through my examination, I have shown Juliet's flaws and how they pave the way for disaster in the play.

Essay 2

Choose a **play** which contains examples of human strength and human weakness.

Explain how the dramatist presents these strengths and weaknesses and discuss which one is more significant in the play as a whole.

In your answer you must refer closely to the text and at least **two** of: characterisation, theme, key scene(s), or any other appropriate feature.

Answer

The play “Romeo and Juliet” by William Shakespeare contains many examples of human strength and weakness. I intend to show, through examination of theme and characterisation, which is more significant: strength or weakness.

The first section of the play, before Act Three Scene One, I feel demonstrates human strength through the emotion of love. This theme is introduced by the Prologue when we are told of the “star-crossed lovers”. This creates an optimistic expectation despite the fact that they “take their lives” and helps to convey love as a human strength. Sampson and Gregory, the Capulet workers, also speak of love. Their way is cruder; they say they want to “thrust [Montague’s] maids to the wall”. This also perhaps shows love of some sort.

Romeo is very much the symbol of love at this point. He uses elaborate oxymoron to show his confused emotional state: “o brawling love, o loving hate”. The presence of love here outweighs that of hate and emphasises the strength in humanity. Love is most obvious in the famous balcony scene, where Romeo and Juliet exchange their vows of love. Juliet states that her “bounty is as boundless as the sea” and Romeo declares that “with love’s light wings did [he] o’erperch these walls”. This scene emphasises love; a human strength.

Weakness in humans is represented by the theme of hate during and after the killing of Tybalt, and this takes over from love as the main theme of the play. Tybalt’s hate for Romeo overcomes Romeo’s love for Tybalt – this could be said to show that human weakness has triumphed and is more significant than human strength. Tybalt declares that Romeo is a “fiend” and tries to kill him, but Mercutio fights Tybalt and is killed. In a rage of hate, Romeo slays Tybalt. This makes clear the change in theme of the play: Romeo, the figure of love, has been overcome by hate. Events take a turn for the worse after this point. Juliet dismisses the Nurse as a “most wicked fiend” – this may show that hate has taken over Juliet. Capulet also expresses hate when he says that if Juliet does not marry Paris, she can “hang, beg, starve, die in the street”. This again emphasises the human weakness of hate.

Despite all this hate present in the section after Act Three Scene One, love is victorious in the end – the “ancient grudge” is resolved. This suggests that the strength of human beings found in love conquers our greatest weakness of hate.

The selfish plan and actions of the Friar could symbolise human weakness. I believe that the Friar, through his plan, attempted to be credited with resolving the “ancient grudge” in Verona. He kept the secret of the lovers from everyone so that perhaps only he could take credit for turning the families’ “rancour into pure love”. This shows a basic human

weakness. Also the fact that the Friar remained in Verona instead of taking the message to Mantua suggests that he wanted to be there to be praised when the feud was resolved.

Perhaps also the Apothecary, from whom Romeo buys his poison, could be said to represent weakness in human character. His breaking of the law demonstrated that he cared more for silver than the lives of other people.

The character of Juliet perhaps shows strength in humans. Despite pressures from all around her, Juliet strived to be with Romeo. This is perhaps one of the greatest strengths in humanity: to stand up for what one believes to be right. The fact that Juliet excluded the Nurse (her only real friend) from her plan demonstrates that she was committed to Romeo and wanted to be with him no matter what. This, coupled with Juliet's deceit towards her family, means that Juliet is a symbol of what it is to be human. She strives to achieve what she desires, despite all the difficulties she faces. She must defy tradition and go against the wishes of her father – this demonstrates a strength in people; to think for themselves.

I feel that through examination of the themes and characterisation of 'Romeo and Juliet', I have demonstrated that although weaknesses of people are displayed, human strength is more significant as Juliet's actions lead to the resolution of the feud and the restoration of love in Verona.

Essay 3

“What characters actually do; what characters say; what other characters say about them – there are many ways by which a playwright can create a character.”

From the play you have studied, “Romeo and Juliet”, examine the techniques the author has used to make a minor character or characters convincing.

Answer

In “Romeo and Juliet”, Shakespeare uses actions and language to make the character of Friar Lawrence convincing. I intend to examine the techniques used to create the character, and to show how these contribute to his credibility.

We first meet the Friar Lawrence well into the play; the lovers have already met and confirmed their love, and Romeo comes to the Friar to arrange a wedding. Before Romeo arrives, the Friar is picking herbs, and shows a real knowledge of nature; this makes his later administering of sleeping potion to Juliet more credible. As he ponders philosophy, he neatly summarises his Christian beliefs:

Virtue itself turns vice being misapplied,
And vice sometime’s by action dignified.

This also summarises the play, since the goodness of the lovers’ passion, and the Friar’s intentions, leads to tragedy, just as their deaths bring about goodness between the feuding houses. The Friar’s wisdom is again evident in his foreboding warning to the impassioned Romeo:

These violent delights have violent ends

His insight makes him a more credible confidante of Romeo, although it does raise questions about his conduct throughout the play.

It seems strange that such a sensible man could resolve to marry the lovers, considering his concern over Romeo’s fickle love:

Is Rosaline, whom you didst love so dear,
So soon forsaken?

moreover, in full knowledge of the bitter grudge between the families:

For this alliance may so happy prove,
To turn your households’ rancour to pure love.

His naivety in this regard is unsettling, although I feel it also serves to show his optimistic nature.

The Friar’s role as a friend to Romeo is clear in Act 3, where he breaks the news of the Prince’s sentence. Romeo responds badly to his banishment, and refuses to get up from the floor. When the Nurse arrives with a ring from Juliet, the Friar can take Romeo’s despondency no longer, and asks “Art thou a man?” before trying to cheer him up by describing his “pack of blessings”, and then suggesting a plan of action. Here Shakespeare has shown the Friar in a different light; he has clearly been annoyed with

Romeo and lets him know this, at great length. His irritation does not stop him giving good advice, though, and the Nurse remarks:

I could have stayed here all the night
To hear good counsel

This scene shows the audience the humanity of the Friar, through his exasperation with Romeo, and the harshness with which he asks “Art thou a man?”.

The audience next sees Friar Lawrence when Juliet comes to him for help in Act 4. Her father has arranged for her to be married, and with the betrayal of her Nurse, she is left alone. The Friar understands her predicament and rightly believes her threats of suicide, and so he proposes

A thing like death to chide away this shame

His plan is adventurous, but Juliet readily accepts it, and only expresses her fears to the audience prior to swallowing the potion:

What if it be a poison which the friar
Subtly hath ministered to have me dead,
Lest in this marriage he should be dishonoured,
Because he married me before to Romeo?
I fear it is, and yet methinks it should not,
For he hath still been tried a holy man.

Her point is reasonable, since the Friar would have faced an awkward situation should his deceit have become known. It is testament to the Friar’s good character and reputation that Juliet at once dismisses this, because he is a trusted religious figure.

There is some doubt about the Friar’s trustworthiness in the following scene, where he consoles the Capulets over Juliet’s apparent death. He plays his part in the plan with cunning, as he enters the chamber asking

Come, is the bride ready to go to church?

and proceeds to console the Capulets with no hesitancy in his deceit. This may prompt the audience to question the ‘holiness’ of the Friar, since he has already conducted a secret marriage and administered the potion to Juliet, although it is clear he is only deceiving the Capulets through his loyalty to Juliet.

In the tragic final scene, the Friar arrives at the Capulet tomb to find Paris slain and Romeo dead by Juliet’s side. When Juliet awakes, he tells her:

A greater power than we can contradict
Hath thwarted our intents.

suggesting the influence of fate, to which the audience has been privy since the prologue. When he tells her bluntly

Thy husband in thy bosom there lies dead;
And Paris too. Come I’ll dispose of thee
Among a sisterhood of holy nuns.

he is clearly less sensitive and accepting of Juliet’s love, and when she makes no move to go, he flees, saying “I dare no longer stay”. This again raises the question of the Friar’s

reputation, since he is clearly afraid of being discovered. Also, he leaves Juliet to cope with the death of her husband, and later suggests he did not consider her committing suicide:

But, as it seems, did violence on herself.

However, the Friar's one moment of selfishness does serve to make him a more acceptable character, given the circumstances in which he found himself.

Any questions which have been raised throughout the play about the reputation or motivations of Friar Lawrence are cleared in the final scene, when Prince Escalus, on hearing the Friar's story, and considering Romeo's letter, declares

We still have known thee for a holy man

This suggests the Friar will not be punished for his part in the events, although he will no doubt be left with a tortured conscience.

The Friar may only be a minor character, but the influence he has on the story is considerable, and throughout the play, the audience is presented with his actions and words, as well as the occasional opinion presented by another character. All these methods of creating a credible character are fully exploited by Shakespeare, and the result is a man the audience can, to an extent, understand, and sympathise with.